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PARALLELS AND ANALOGUES TO THE DEATH OF QRVAR ODD

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MORE than twenty years ago a well-known episode of the *Qrvar Oddsaga*, the one which recounts the hero's death, was made the subject of a brief and somewhat inconclusive inquiry.¹ The story runs as follows:²

Qrvar Oddr is told by a seeress that after a long life he will die by his horse Faxi. He thereupon kills the horse to make a realization of the prophecy impossible. After roving in many parts of the world, he returns to Iceland, and on gazing at the skeleton of his good horse he is bitten by a snake concealed in the empty skull. From the effect of this bite he soon dies.

In this form the story is unquestionably a pure myth, for the simple reason that there are no poisonous snakes in Iceland.³ Apart from this basic consideration, there are other facts which leave no doubt about the unhistorical character of the tale, clearly a migratory legend, variants of which were pointed out in Medieval Russia⁴ and in England.

The story contains certain elements (motives) which bear close resemblance to others occurring elsewhere either by themselves or in combination with such as are not found in our tale. Since these motives do not appear to have been analyzed and examined separately, an inquiry into the subject may not be amiss.

The individual motives referred to are the following: (1) A person is told that he will die by the agency of an animal or even a lifeless object, whereupon he takes all possible precautions to nullify the prophecy; but the latter is fulfilled nevertheless. (2) A prophecy exists to the effect that the hero will die by the

¹ A. Taylor, *Modern Philology*, XIX (1921-1922), pp. 93-106.

² Ed. Rafn, *FAS*, II, pp. 169-189, 300; R. C. Boer, *Leyden*, 1888, pp. 15, 17, 193.

³ Cf. *Scandinavian Studies and Notes*, XVI (1940), pp. 22 ff.

⁴ To the texts and references cited by Taylor, p. 94, cf. now also V. J. Mansikka, *Die Religion der Ostslaven* (*F.F.C.*, No. 43), Helsinki, 1922, pp. 99 f.; S. H. Cross, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, Cambridge, Mass., 1930 (*Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, XII), p. 155.

agency of another man; that man is slain, but the prophecy is fulfilled none the less. (3) A prophecy is made to the effect that the hero will die by the agency of an apparently innocuous object; the hero is inclined to laugh it off, considering its fulfilment impossible, but the misfortune predicted comes to pass. (4) The hero, mindful of the prophecy but certain of the impossibility of its being realized, scorns it, when the seemingly impossible happens, and he is slain after all.

It is proposed to discuss these motives individually and to draw from the facts ascertained such conclusions on the origin and migration of the story as may seem warranted.

I

The curious feature of the *Qrvar Oddsaga* is the fact that the death of the hero is brought about, however indirectly, by his horse. Now the same useful and harmless domestic animal recurs in a Chinese variant:⁵

An old man had an only daughter, whom he was in the habit of leaving all alone in his house, with a white stallion as sole companion, while he himself went travelling. Feeling lonely one day, the girl said jokingly to the horse: "If you will bring my father home, I will marry you." No sooner had the stallion heard these words than he ran away, straight to the place where its owner happened to be. By dint of neighing it aroused the old man's curiosity: he mounted it and returned home. But from that day on the animal behaved strangely, and on her father's questioning her, the girl confessed her rash promise. The old man killed the horse, flayed it, and suspended the hide in the yard to dry. Then he started out again on a journey. Some few months later the daughter went for a walk with a neighbor. On crossing the yard she tossed the dry hide with her foot, saying: "A stupid animal such as you wanted a man's daughter for a wife. It served you right that you were killed." As soon as she had pronounced these words, the horse's hide wrapped itself around the girl and vanished with her. All searches proved useless, until a few days later the girl was seen hanging on the branches of a tree all wrapped up in a horse's hide. She next transformed herself into a silkworm; but some time later she reappeared in human shape, announcing that she had become a saint and a patron of sericulture. As such she was given a regular cult and a sanctuary, where silkworm breeders say their prayers and make their vows to the great Goddess with the Horse's Head.

⁵ Richard Wilhelm, *Chinesische Volksmärchen*, Jena, 1921, pp. 47 f.; cf. W. Eberhard, *Typen chinesischer Volksmärchen*, Helsinki, 1937, p. 79 (*F.F.C.*, No. 120). The story has been preserved in some nine variants, the oldest of which goes back to the fourth century of our era. This is thus one of the oldest known texts of our theme.

It is clear, of course, that this strange tale is nothing but an aetiological legend purporting to explain the horse shape of the patron goddess of one of China's vital industries, the real reason for which had been forgotten.⁶ Such tales are common everywhere; suffice it to recall the stories told, in Ancient Greece, of the horse-headed Demeter.⁷ If it is further remembered that the horse never was a holy animal anywhere in China, while it was the most useful and most important domestic animal of the nomad tribes of Northern Asia, that white stallions in particular were held in reverence, and that the horse played an important part in the fertility rites of the Aryan peoples,⁸ the conclusion will seem logical that we are not dealing with a native Chinese tradition but with a migratory tale which appears to have been carried to China at an early date by one of the many nomad nations which temporarily subjected the Empire of the Middle to their sway. Its origin must in all probability be sought in Northern Asia or in the Central Asian uplands.

A similar story, though with a really dangerous animal as protagonist, is known to exist in the Laos country in Farther India:⁹

A king had a daughter at whose birth a wise man had foretold that she would be killed by a tiger once she was a maiden grown. To safeguard her, the king built her a house on a huge pillar, where she dwelt with her attendants. But it happened one day that one of the professional tiger-hunters brought a dead one to the palace of the king. The princess, on hearing this, came down from her tower and plucked a whisker from the tiger, and as she blew her breath on it she cried: "I do not fear thee, O my enemy, for thou art dead!" But the poison which is in the whiskers of a tiger entered into the blood of the princess, and she died.

In both these Asiatic tales the person whose death is brought about is a girl. The same is true in a story of the *Arabian Nights*,¹⁰

⁶ Wilhelm, p. 391, suggests an astronomical reason.

⁷ *Rheinisches Museum f. Philologie*, LXXXI (1932), pp. 305-320.

⁸ Cf. P. Wilhelm Koppers, *Anthropos*, XXIV (1929), pp. 1077 ff.; Alois Closs, *ibid.*, XXIX (1934), p. 488, n. 38.

⁹ Katherine N. Fleeson, *Laos Folk-Lore of Farther India*, New York (1899), pp. 32 f.

¹⁰ Ed. Habicht, XI (1843), pp. 205-209; Uebers. M. Henning, Leipzig (1895-1899), XVIII, pp. 195-201; Chauvin, *Bibliographie*, VIII, pp. 104 f.

found also in certain other Arabic writings.¹¹ It reads as follows:

At the birth of a girl child the prediction is made by a stranger that she will belong to 100 men, that she will marry her servant, and that she will die stung by a spider. Thereupon the servant, who has overheard the prophecy and who is not anxious to see it fulfilled so far as he is concerned, stabs the baby with a knife and then seeks safety in flight. But the girl recovers, becomes a famous light-o'-love, plying her trade in a prosperous seaport town, and finally meets the erstwhile servant of her parents, who in the meantime has amassed considerable wealth. He falls in love with her and in the end marries her. Being one day engaged in conversation in her room with her husband, she relates her story so far as she knew it. Then her husband, who is still very much in love with her, makes himself known as the former servant of her parents and adds the prophecy of the spider that will be her death. To guard against all danger, he has a tower built for her in the desert, where she might be safe from spiders. One day, as they are together in the tower, a spider appears on the ceiling. He leaps up to kill it; but she stops him, saying: "Such a miserable thing is to kill me? By Heaven, no one but myself shall slay it." She accordingly sweeps it to the floor and crushes it to death with her foot. But the poison of the spider enters her body between toe and toe-nail; her foot becomes infected, and she dies.¹²

It will be noticed that in this Arabic text our theme is combined with another, that of the man who attempts to destroy a baby girl of whom it had been foretold that she would be his future wife, a story quite wide-spread in the Eastern Mediterranean and elsewhere.¹³

Another Arabic story offers the following reading:¹⁴

Astrologers foretold a king that he would die at a given hour on a given day by the sting of a scorpion. To prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy, he mounts his horse (which he has first caused to be carefully cleaned) and rides into the sea far enough to be covered with water as the fatal hour approaches. Then it happens that the horse sneezes, ejecting from its nostrils a scorpion, which promptly stings the king, so that he dies then and there.

¹¹ René Basset, *Mille et un contes, récits et légendes arabes*, Paris, 1924-1927, II, p. 208.

¹² Basset, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 207 f.; Chauvin, *loc. cit.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 105; Bolte-Polívka, *Märchen-Anmerkungen*, I, p. 288; Thompson, *Motif-Index*, M 312. 1. 1; W. Wollner, *Untersuchungen über die Volksepik der Grossrussen*, Leipzig, 1879, p. 77; I. F. Hapgood, *The Epic Songs of Russia*, New York, 1886, p. 33; London, 1915, pp. 12 ff.; F. Adolpho Coelho, *Contos populares portugueses*, Lisboa, 1879, p. 131; G. F. Abbott, *Macedonian Folklore*, Cambridge, 1903, p. 128; A. Aarne, *Der reiche Mann und sein Schwiegersohn (F.F.C., No. 23)*, Helsingfors, 1916, pp. 109 ff.; Eberhard, *op. cit.*, p. 202, No. 149.

¹⁴ Basset, II, p. 328; cf. Chauvin, VIII, p. 105: *Le scorpion*.

A story translated from the Kunama language, spoken in Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia, shares with the two Arabic tales the feature that the doomed victim, to elude the realization of the prophecy, removes to a region where the dangerous animal or object either does not exist or is not likely to have easy access to his person:¹⁵

A man is told by a seer that he will die by the agency of a thorn. Intent on nullifying the prophecy, our hero moves to a region where there are no thorns and settles there. Subsequently he buys a sheep with a bushy tail. As he is about to inspect the animal, he seizes it by the tail; but there is a thorn hidden among the hair, and it inflicts upon him a wound from the effects of which he dies.

The two Arabic stories have brought us close to the Mediterranean, and it is here that we meet with some characteristic variants of our theme, which, however, are not always fully preserved.

Diodorus Siculus (IV. 22. 3) has recorded a curious tradition localized at Poseidonia, the Roman Paestum and present-day Pesto, in Campania:

There was once among the natives of that region a certain hunter famed for his exploits in hunting. Now it had been his practice to dedicate to Artemis the heads and feet of the animals he killed and to nail them to the trees. But once, having overpowered a huge boar, he said, as though in contempt of the goddess: "The head of the beast I dedicate to myself," and bearing out his words, he hanged the head on a tree. Then, the atmosphere being quite warm, at noon day, he fell asleep, and while he was thus resting, the thong broke, and the head fell down of itself upon the sleeper and killed him.

This story, which Diodorus took over from the Sicilian Timaeus,¹⁶ has no parallel elsewhere. There can of course be no question about the genuineness of the *hybris* motive, very common, as Diodorus himself noted, in tales belonging to the cycle of Artemis. Unfortunately, the rest of the account is less immune from criticism. For to dedicate the boar's head to himself, the hunter would have had to dedicate to himself the tree on which he chose to suspend his trophy—which would have been the equivalent of founding a cult for himself. But such an act was an unheard-of

¹⁵ Leo Reinisch, *Die Kunama-Sprache in Nordost-Afrika*, II (*Sitzungsber. d. Wiener Akad. d. Wiss., phil.-hist. Cl.*, CXIX), p. 19.

¹⁶ J. Geffcken, *Timaïos' Geographie des Westens*, Berlin, 1892 (*Philologische Untersuchungen*, XIII), p. 54.

thing in pre-Hellenistic times and certainly alien to the notions of the rustic populations of Campania. The original story must therefore have offered a somewhat different reading, though the huntsman's *hybris* was no doubt present. It would seem rather likely that he had been foretold, by oracle or in a dream, that the boar in question would be his death. Having killed the animal, he boasted, while hanging up its head as a trophy, that it had not killed him after all. And then the unexpected happens, and he is slain by the falling boar's head.

That our surmise is correct and that a fuller version of the theme was known in antiquity may be safely concluded from the rationalized story of Atys' death as told by Herodotus (I. 43):

The Lydian king Croesus dreams that his son Atys will die from the blow of an iron weapon. The monarch thereupon takes all precautions to keep his son out of the armed forces and far from all weapons. Subsequently a hunt is organized, to free Mysia from the ravages of a wild boar. Atys prevails upon his father to let him take part in the hunt, in which he is fatally slain, not indeed by the boar, but by the dart of one of his companions.

An application of the comparative method, especially the parallel traditions of the deaths of Adonis and Attis, would seem to indicate that behind this rationalized version lies an older one, in which Atys was slain by a boar.¹⁷

Nor is this all. There existed, besides, an ancient story which at an early date was incorporated into, or confused with, the cycle of the Hunt of the Calydonian Boar. It presents the following reading:¹⁸

Ancaeus, the son of Poseidon and Astypalaea, ruler in Samos and one of the Argonauts, was very fond of viticulture. As one day he was planting grape-vines, a seer told him that he would die before having a chance to taste the new wine. At the time of the vintage he proceeded to fill his glass with the new wine, mocking the while at the seer, who gravely remarked: Πολλὰ μετὰ ξὺ πέλει κύλικος καὶ χεῖλος ἄκρου, "There is many a slip twixt the cup and the lip." At that moment a messenger rushed in with the tidings that a large wild boar had entered the vineyard and was laying it waste. Ancaeus quickly put the goblet on the table and ran out to stay the ravages of the boar and preserve his vines; but he found

¹⁷ E. Meyer, in Pauly-Wissowa, *R.-E.*, II, col. 2262; H. Hepding, *Der Attiskult*, Giessen, 1903, p. 101; Sir James G. Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, London, 1935, I, p. 286.

¹⁸ Aristotle ap. schol. Apoll. Rhod. I. 188; Tzetz. ad Lyc. 488 ff.; cf. Pauly-Wissowa, *R.-E.*, I, col. 2218 f.

the task more difficult than he had thought and was killed in his encounter with the animal; but the prophet's words passed into a proverb.

Another incomplete version of our theme exists in Ireland:¹⁹

Diarmuid's father once slew the only child of Reachtaire, whereupon the angry parent transformed the dead boy into a "cropped green pig, having neither ear nor tail," adding this curse: "I conjure thee that thou have the same length of life as Diarmuid O'Duibhne, and that it be by thee that he shall fall at last." Then Diarmuid's divine protector, Aengus mac Oc, lays upon his protégé the *gais* never to hunt a swine. In the sequel Diarmuid is prevailed upon by the trickery of Fionn, with whose betrothed he had eloped, to go on a boar hunt. He slays the fatal boar, coming off unhurt, but is further induced by Fionn to pace the boar's hide, as a result of which a poisonous bristle enters his heel, causing a deadly wound.

In analyzing this story we must bear in mind that Fionn, the offended husband, is the prime mover: it is he who sets the action in motion by pursuing Diarmuid, until at last his vengeance is satisfied. This happens the moment Diarmuid is slain, as in many versions he is, by the tusks of the boar. The feature of Diarmuid's first slaying the boar without injury to himself and then coming to grief by pacing the dead boar's hide is clearly an unwarranted and unnecessary addition, which to all appearances owes its existence to a contamination of the main theme with a secondary one, which seems to have read as follows:

Diarmuid has received a prophecy to the effect that he will die by the agency of a wild boar. In spite of this and of the *gais* laid upon him he goes on the boar-hunt and slays a wild boar, coming off unhurt. Then, to mock the prophecy, he paces the dead boar's hide but receives a deadly wound from the bristles of the animal. Thus the prophecy comes true after all.

That some such story was once current in Northern Europe is proved by the German traditions of Hackelberg, which have been given some discussion in the article referred to at the outset of the present study.²⁰

¹⁹ *Folk-Lore*, XLVII (1936), pp. 347 ff., where a complete bibliography will be found. For versions telling of Diarmuid's pacing the boar's hide, cf. J. G. Campbell, *The Fians; or Stories, Poems, and Traditions of Fionn and his Warrior Band*, London, 1891 (*Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition, Argyllshire Series*, No. IV), pp. 56 ff.; J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, Edinburgh, 1860-1862, III, p. 44.

²⁰ A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 99 ff.

Hackelberg dreams that he will die by a boar and as a result abstains from a hunting party scheduled for the following day. A huge boar is shot and brought in. Hackelberg comes up and lifts the boar's head, saying: "You are the monster, then, that was to take my life. There is no chance of that now; you shall do me no injury." With that he lets the head go; then the tusk scratches his calf, an infection sets in, and he dies from the wound.

Of particular interest, in view of the Irish story of Diarmuid's death, is a German text offering the following reading:²¹

Hackelberg dreams that he is engaged in a life and death struggle with a wild boar, which finally overcomes him. Subsequently the dream comes true, except that he slays the boar. Seized with *hybris* he stamps on the prostrate beast and shouts: "Strike now, if you can!" In uttering these words he accidentally treads on the boar's tusks and wounds himself. The wound festers and finally causes his death.

What is less well known is the existence of the same tradition in Wales:²²

A kind of dragon called *carrog* once caused great devastation in the Vale of Conway. One night, a man living at Dôl-y-Garrog dreamt that the *carrog* had bitten him. The next day the monster was to be hunted. For safety's sake the man of the dream remained in bed all day. Towards evening the *carrog* lay dead, and the man went with others to see it. There it lay dead and at last harmless. The man gave it a contemptuous kick; but one of its teeth penetrated his boot and into his toe, and poisoned he died as he had dreamt.

An Anglesey magician foretold that a viper would come to Penhesgin and kill the heir. To avoid danger, the heir was sent to England. When the viper appears, a pit is dug in a field and covered with a brass vessel which, gleaming in the sunlight, attracts the viper, so that it can be killed easily. The heir returns, is shown the dead viper and, in kicking it, is poisoned and dies. Thus the prophecy was fulfilled in spite of all precautions taken to nullify it.²³

We shall terminate this survey by quoting a Danish legend from the isle of Bog:²⁴

²¹ J. Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, II⁴, 768; J. and W. Grimm, *Deutsche Sagen*, I, 399, No. 310; cf. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

²² *Wales: A National Magazine* (monthly). Ed. Owen M. Edwards, 1894-1896. Wrexham, I, p. 279; cf. T. Gwynn Jones, *Welsh Folklore and Folk-Custom*, London (1930), p. 83.

²³ *Cymru Fu . . . Hanesion, Traddodiadau, Chwedlau a Damhegion Cymraig*. Ed. Isaac Foulkes. Liverpool, 1862-1864, p. 424; Gwynn Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

²⁴ William A. Craigie, *Scandinavian Folk-Lore*, London, 1896, pp. 261 ff.; cf. also p. 439.

A man from Sort-sø in Falster was hired by the people of Bogö to clear the isle from snakes and vipers. This he accomplished, incidentally slaying a dangerous dragon (which had not been included in the bargain) and coming off unharmed. After a year or two he took a fancy to see whether his job had been thoroughly done, and so he went down to the beach to see the place where the worm had perished in the flames. But then a mishap befell him. One of its sharp bones which lay hid among the ashes pierced his thin shoe and entered the sole of his foot. The wound swelled up and finally brought on his death.

This tale is clearly incomplete: one would expect that a prophecy had foretold him that he would die by the agency of a dragon. That such a prophecy once formed part of the tale is proved by the following feature. Before accepting the offer made him by the good people of Bogö our hero very carefully inquired whether there was a dragon in the island and only on being assured that there was none did he undertake the task, though even then he took all possible precautions. Such careful inquiries and sound preparations are not a common feature of dragon-fight stories and would seem to point to the fact that our hero had been put on his guard by some prophecy.

This conclusion is borne out, it would seem, by an English version recorded in the eighteenth century and outlined by Taylor.²⁵ There the hero, Lord Shorland, many years after killing his horse to prevent a realization of the prophecy, espied the skull and some other bones of the animal on the beach and, relating the account of the prediction and the slaying of the horse, happened to kick the skull. In so doing he hurt one of his toes; the wound festered and brought on his death.

The Danish and English stories in turn explain two incongruities of the *Qrvar Oddsaga* and its Russian analogue. In those texts the hero's death is brought about by a snake lurking under the skeleton of his slain horse, although (1) there are no snakes in Iceland, while in Northern Russia only one poisonous species is known to exist, viz., *Vipera berus*, dangerous only if its bite be neglected, and (2) the prophecy had it that he would die by the agency of his horse. In these circumstances we are probably not far wrong in assuming that in a more primitive form of the saga episode Qrvar Odd, like the anonymous hero of the Danish story and Lord Shorland of the English tradition, trampled on the

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 95 f.

skeleton of his horse, making, perhaps, some boastful remark on the essential vanity of the prophecy or of all prophecies. Then one of the animal's sharp bones pierced his shoe, inflicting a wound on his foot. The snake was brought in subsequently, to remove the seeming improbability of such a slight wound being mortal, an improbability all the greater in the eyes of men not familiar with the nature of infection and blood-poisoning.

On surveying the variants outlined thus far, we may differentiate between three main groups. In the first (A) the hero's death is brought about by the agency of his horse. These stories are known to have been current, from the early Middle Ages, all over Northern Europe, in Iceland, England, Russia, and no doubt also in Denmark and Norway. One variant appears even to have penetrated into China, carried thither, in all probability, by some Tatar tribe. In the second (B) the agent is a ferocious beast, a boar in the Mediterranean countries (including the Near East), in Ireland, and Germany, a tiger in Farther India. That there is some connection between these texts is shown, we believe, by the fact that in the Laos version the whiskers of the dead tiger play much the same rôle as the bristles of the dead boar in the Irish story of Diarmuid; but much additional evidence would be required to give us a reasonable assurance on this point. In the third group (C) the agent is a small poisonous animal, a spider, a scorpion, a snake, or even a thorn. These versions are in the main restricted to Arabic-speaking countries and to Northeastern Africa, whither the theme appears to have been carried by the Arabs. But the poisonous snake also makes its appearance in two Welsh texts and in the Norman traditions current on the deaths of Qrvar Odd and Oleg.

II

What distinguishes the second group of variants, to which we now come, from the group just reviewed is the fact that in the former the seemingly impossible happens not by the agency of an animal or object, but by that of a dead man.

An ancient prophecy told of the Irish chief Mesgegra that he was sure to avenge himself on the Ulstermen. Unfortunately for the prophecy (so it seemed) he was himself slain by Conall Cearnach at Claena, Co. Kildare, and the pre-

diction seemed impossible of fulfillment; but it came true none the less, and here is how. In accordance with an old Irish custom the slayer had extracted the victim's brain, mixed it with lime and hardened it into a ball, which in due course was placed among the trophies of Ulster in the great house of the Royal Branch of Emania. One day two court fools got hold of it and began to play with it. Then Cet mac Magash, a famous Connacht champion whose nation was at war with Ulster, happened to come up to them in disguise, cajoled the ball out of them and returned with it to Connacht. Subsequently he cast it from a sling and fatally wounded the Ulster king.²⁶

Much the same theme became attached to another Irish earl, named Melbrig-Tooth. A saga dealing with the Norse earls ruling over the Orkney Islands and incorporated both in Snorri's *Heimskringla* and in the great Saga of Olaf Tryggvason relates how the Irishman was slain by Earl Sigurd who, in accordance with another time-honored custom, fastened the victim's head on the crupper of his saddle. But in the head was a projecting tooth, against which he struck the calf of his leg, causing a wound which festered and led to his death.²⁷ Though the Norse accounts are silent on this point, it is rather likely that a prophecy had predicted that Melbrig-Tooth would avenge himself on the Norse, much as Mesgegra was to avenge himself on the Ulstermen.

A Norman story localized at Condé-sur-Noireau (dép. Calvados) reports a similar happening:²⁸

An unjust bailiff takes advantage of a practical joke played by a personal enemy of his upon a third party in order to condemn the man to death and to have him hanged. Before going to the gallows, the victim proclaims anew his innocence and summons the unjust judge before God's tribunal in forty days.²⁹ On the thirty-ninth day after this event the bailiff, on his way home, passes by the gallows, on which the corpse of the unfortunate man is still dangling, and he cannot help boasting to a sheriff's officer that his enemy has now been dead for 39 days, while he himself is still hale and hearty. At the same time he hits the corpse with his cane. Immediately a swarm of corpse-flies rushes upon him,

²⁶ E. O'Curry, *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*, Dublin, 1878, pp. 275 f.; R. Thurneysen, *Sagen aus dem alten Irland*, Berlin, 1901, p. 71; *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum 17. Jahrhundert*, Halle, 1921, pp. 510, 535 ff.

²⁷ *Orkneyingasaga*, c. 2; *Haraldssaga Hárfag.*, c. 22; *Olafssaga Tryggvas.*, c. 95.

²⁸ Victor Brunet, *Contes populaires de la Basse-Normandie*, Paris, 1900, pp. 36 ff.

²⁹ Cf. S. Hardung, *Die Vorladung vor Gottes Gericht*, Bühl-Baden, 1934.

settling on his face and neck and stinging him ferociously. He reaches his home ill with fever and dies on the following day, just as his victim had predicted.

A Russian *bylina* relates how the hero Vasili, with his *druzhina*, makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to atone for past misdeeds. When they come to the "Hill of the Saracens," Vasili kicks a skull, which protests with a human voice, predicting that he shall himself be buried on the same spot. On the top of the hill is a stone with an inscription to the effect that whoever shall amuse himself by leaping from end to end of the stone shall break his turbulent head thereon. Vasili and his followers divert themselves by leaping from side to side only and then proceed on their journey. After having tried his best to do penance, Vasili, with his men, returns from Palestine. On reaching the Hill of the Saracens he cannot resist the temptation of leaping over the stone, this time from end to end; but in doing so he falls and breaks his head; his men bury him on the spot where the skull lies, returning sadly to Novgorod, to bear the tidings to Vasili's mother.³⁰

In considering the variants of this second group of tales one is struck by the fact that their distribution, much as the diffusion of group A of the first set of tales discussed above, coincides with the territory covered by the maritime expeditions of the Norsemen, being found in Ireland, Orkney, Normandy, and Northern Russia. It is not likely that this is pure accident.

III

What differentiates group III from groups I and II is the fact that the agency by which the hero is to come to harm is an absolutely innocuous object. The prophecy is realized by a poisonous snake or scorpion which has taken refuge in it, as a result of which the hero, on meddling with the object, is bitten and dies from the wound.

A local legend current in Mecklenburg and taken down shortly after the middle of the last century runs as follows:³¹

³⁰ V. Jagič, *Archiv f. slavische Philologie*, I (1876), p. 102; Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, II (Cambridge, 1936), p. 55.

³¹ A. Niederhöffer, *Mecklenburgs Volkssagen*, Leipzig, 1858-1862, IV, p. 172; K. Bartsch, *Sagen, Märchen und Gebräuche aus Mecklenburg*, Wien, 1879-1880, I, p. 225.

A man dreams that he will die, on his way to church, from the bite of a stone serpent's head of the type then common in mortuary sculpture. Nothing daunted, he attends the Sunday service and, on crossing the cemetery and passing by such a monument, boastingly puts his hand in the open mouth of the serpent, saying: "Look here, thou hast not bitten me after all!" Instantly he withdraws his hand, bitten by a poisonous snake that had lurked in the hollow of the stone, and he dies then and there.

This tale, in spite of its recent date, goes back into the Middle Ages. Toward the beginning of the fourteenth century the Icelander Jón Halldórsson told the following story, which he localized in Italy:³²

While studying at Bologna, Jón met two other students, likewise named John, a Norwegian and an Englishman. One day the two left the cathedral jointly. In passing the gate, where there stood two sculptured lions' heads, the Englishman looked smilingly at one of these and told his companion of a dream he had had the night before. He had dreamt that one of the heads had come to life and had bitten off his right hand. Then he stuck his finger into the stone mouth of the lion, repeating: "This lion, in my dream, bit off my hand." At the same moment he fell dead to the ground; an asp that had lain hidden in the stone lion's head had pricked him with the venomous point of its tail.

That this story was current in Italy during the fourteenth century is proved by another version, recorded by Petrarch:³³

Simile quiddam vel legi vel audiui, somniasse quendam morderi se a leone marmoreo, ex his qui in templorum vestibula cerni solent, et morsum perueniente mortiferum; die autem postero, cum templi fores casu praeteriret, leone conspecto, non sine risu, somnium suum inter comites renarrantem, et manu in apertum os illius protinus inecta, dicentem: Eu nocturnus hostis meus: scorpionem qui in imis faucibus leonis delitescebat, lethaliter pupugisse. Sed domi iam satis somnium est.

Petrarch's story was written after 1344 and is therefore separated from the time of Jón Halldórsson's student days at Bologna (which occurred in the latter part of the thirteenth century) by more than half a century. The Icelander cannot therefore have drawn on Petrarch. It is of course needless to add that Jón Halldórsson and his work remained utterly unknown to the Italian humanist. Many of Halldórsson's stories are known

³² H. Gering, *Islendzk Aeventyri. Isländische Novellen und Märchen*, Halle, 1882-1883, I, pp. 86 f.; II, pp. 71 f.

³³ *Francisci Petrarcae V. C. Rerum Memorandarum lib. IV*. Sumptibus Esaiæ le Preux, 1610, p. 354, lib. IV, cap. 4, §19.

to be translations from the Latin, and a common Latin original of both the Icclander's and Petrarch's texts will best account for the curious resemblance of the two tales, a resemblance which extends even to minor details.

What was the source of this lost Latin story? Johannes Bolte has³⁴ referred to an *exemplum* of Valerius Maximus, erroneously, it seems, since the narrative in question is merely a version of Croesus' dream outlined above and belonging to group I B of our scheme. In reality it appears to have been derived, directly or indirectly, from an epigram of Martial (III. 19), which reads as follows:

Proxima centenis ostenditur ursa columnis,
 exornant fictae qua platanona ferae.
 Huius dum patulos adludens temptat hiatus
 pulcher Hylas, teneram mersit in ora manum:
 uipera sed caeco scelerata latebat in aere
 uiuebatque anima deteriore fera.
 Non sensit puer esse dolos, nisi dente recepto
 dum parit. O facinus, falsa quod ursa fuit!

Everything in this simple tale points to a real event which seems to have occurred in Rome when Martial lived and wrote there, i.e., in the reign of Domitian, the only fictitious element being, probably, the boy's name. Instead of the lion we have here a sculptured bear, and instead of Petrarch's scorpion and Jón Halldórsson's asp it is a viper which inflicts the mortal wound. Only the warning dream is absent, and this, it must be admitted, could be easily added by any imaginative story-teller.

Petrarch's text became extremely popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with the result that our tale entered many collections of *exempla*³⁵ and became one of the sources of Hans Sachs's narrative *Der Lantzknecht mit dem Scorpion*.³⁶ There can be little doubt that the local legend collected in Mecklenburg owes its origin to one of these semi-popular *exempla*. Since there are no scorpions in Germany, a poisonous snake had to take the place of the insect.

³⁴ In his edition of Johannes Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst*, Berlin, 1924, II, p. 434, No. 827.

³⁵ Bolte, *ed. cit.*, II, pp. 434 f.

³⁶ Cf. A. L. Stiefel, *Zeitschrift f. vgl. Literaturgeschichte*, N.F., X (1896), pp. 29 f.

IV

Little need be said about the hero's boasting or mocking the seer shortly before the sinister prophecy comes to pass. Suffice it to point out that this *hybris* is found in a large number of texts of our theme and may be presumed to have existed in others from which it subsequently disappeared.³⁷ It is not peculiar to our story but occurs quite commonly in connection with prophecies of evil. "The Ides of March are here," said Caesar, if Plutarch is to be believed, on the morning of the day which was to be his last, implying, of course, that, though the fatal day had arrived, he was still hale and hearty. It is obvious that a clear case of *hybris* immediately preceding the hero's fall should for its artistic possibilities have recommended itself to story-tellers in many places and in many periods, so that no valid conclusions can be drawn from its presence in the one or the other of the texts reviewed.

Again, themes like the one here discussed go far to prove not so much the power of fate (as has sometimes been thought) as the trustworthiness of divination. It belongs to a large class of stories, one of which the writer discussed elsewhere several years ago.³⁸ Their wide diffusion is therefore likely to be due, at least in part, to some interested party, that is, to the ubiquitous fraternity of soothsayers, dream-interpreters, shamans, and similar quacks. The belief in and practice of divination were particularly strong among the Ancient Norsemen,³⁹ which will account for the unusually large number of variants hailing from countries controlled or colonized by Scandinavians. This conjecture will also best explain a number of other striking features. Group A of the first set of variants, though recorded in countries as far apart as Iceland and Russia, shows much fewer variations than the ordinary folk-tale propagated by word of mouth. This fact would point to a literary or semi-literary mode of diffusion. Further-

³⁷ It is absent, for example, from the saga text, but very much in evidence in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*.

³⁸ *Tiberius and Thrasyllus* in *American Journal of Philology*, XLVIII (1927), pp. 359-366.

³⁹ Cf. H. Gering, *Ueber weissagung und zauber im nordischen altertum*, Kiel, 1902.

more, a number of the stories reviewed have definitely religious associations. Thus the tale of Croesus' dream and Atys' death was proved long since to be but an euhemerized version of the death of the god Attis by a boar. On the other hand, the Irish tradition of Diarmuid and Grainne was similarly shown to be derived from the Syrian Adonis myth.⁴⁰ Lastly, affinities of the German Hackelberg legend with the story of Adonis have been pointed out repeatedly.⁴¹ It is clear that ordinary diffusion, by word of mouth and without an afterthought, will hardly account for these coincidences, which rather point to semi-learned diffusion by the more or less conscious propaganda of what is likely to have been a more or less close corporation. In the case of group III we have the rare opportunity of being able to follow the process: A literary story current in Italy and in all probability derived from an epigram of Martial reaches far-off Iceland through the medium of one of the many Icelanders studying at Italian universities; the same story, recorded in classical Latin by the greatest humanist of the century, enters various collections of *exempla* and is diffused in Northern Germany by preachers from the pulpits, until it becomes localized in Mecklenburg, there to be recorded as an oral tale in the latter part of the nineteenth century. There is nothing in the nature of things to prevent us from assuming a similar process to have taken place in the early Middle Ages, by which the story of Adonis' and Attis' boar was carried on the one hand to Ireland and Germany, on the other to Farther India.

⁴⁰ *Folk-Lore*, XLVII (1936), pp. 347-361.

⁴¹ J. G. v. Hahn, *Sagwissenschaftliche Studien*, Jena, 1876, p. 398. K. Simrock, *Handbuch der deutschen Mythologie*, Bonn, 1887, p. 225.